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CLEAN NEEDLES BEHIND BARS LONG OVERDUE ***Personal testimonies bring human dimension to addiction and drug use within Canadian prisons***

TORONTO, February 2, 2010 — In a report documenting personal stories from those most affected, people who have experienced prison are adding their voices to the growing number of experts calling for needle and syringe programs in Canada's prisons.

Often visceral reading (see quotes further below), the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network's newest publication, *Under the Skin*, draws on affidavits and testimonies from people across Canada with experience using drugs or sharing needles inside a federal prison, and puts a human face to the following harsh statistics, long known to prison system administrators:

- People in prison suffer at least 10 to 20 times higher rates of HIV and hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection than the population as a whole;
- Drug use occurs regularly in prisons, including by injection, among at least 11 percent of incarcerated people, according to the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC);
- Costly efforts by CSC to prevent drug use are not effective in reducing the spread of blood-borne diseases like HIV and HCV; and
- The vast majority (more than 90 percent) of people in prison eventually return to the community, facilitating the spread of diseases transmitted and exacerbated in prison.

"The words of these courageous men and women paint a portrait of avoidable suffering and systemic discrimination that flies in the face of both international guidelines and Canada's own *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*," says lawyer Sandra Ka Hon Chu, Senior Policy Analyst at the Legal Network and the report's author. "The scientific evidence and legal justifications for prison-based needle and syringe programs have long been established — including in our report from last year, *Clean Switch* — yet still the Canadian government will not implement these proven health services," she adds. "Our lawmakers need to hear these harrowing testimonies and answer an urgent appeal for dignity, health and human rights."

“*Under the Skin* demonstrates through human stories how counter-productive drug prohibition is,” adds Craig Jones, Executive Director of the John Howard Society of Canada. “This is yet another warning to all Canadians: the unintended consequences of drug prohibition include public health implications far beyond prison walls.”

“Since 2006, the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) has been recommending that CSC develop, implement and evaluate at least one pilot needle and syringe program in a prison under its jurisdiction,” says CMA President Dr. Anne Doig. The CMA position reflects the consensus of a number of leading health and human rights organizations, including the Ontario Medical Association, the World Health Organization, UNAIDS, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, the Correctional Investigator of Canada and the Canadian Human Rights Commission. Furthermore, a 2006 review of the scientific evidence by the Public Health Agency of Canada concluded that prison-based needle and syringe programs have largely positive outcomes for the health of people in prison.

Prior to Parliament’s prorogation, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security was studying CSC’s approach to addressing mental health and addictions in federal penitentiaries. The Legal Network was scheduled to appear in February to make the case that providing access to sterile injecting equipment to people in prison would reduce the risks of harm associated with injection drug use, including the transmission of HIV and HCV. With the release of this report, the Legal Network is also calling on the Standing Committee on Health to take up this serious public health issue and ensure that proven health services are no longer denied in prisons to those known to be at much greater risk of infection with HIV and HCV.

Both reports, *Under the Skin* and *Clean Switch*, are available at www.aidslaw.ca/publications.

About the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network

The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (www.aidslaw.ca) promotes the human rights of people living with and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, in Canada and internationally, through research, legal and policy analysis, education, and community mobilization. The Legal Network is Canada’s leading organization working on the legal and human rights issues raised by HIV/AIDS.

– 30 –

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Selected quotes from *Under the Skin*:

- “I’ve seen prisoners inject heroin, cocaine and speed with needles made with pens and other materials. Most people shared their needles in prison.”
- “In the prison system, there are so many drugs around and so many people doing them, it is very difficult to escape drug use.”
- “I would say about one-third of the prison population would inject. Drugs were easy to get. Once drugs got in, guards didn’t really care, because we were already in the worst place we could possibly be in our life.”
- “I have a history of depression, and that in combination with a shoulder injury in my twenties, meant drugs was an easy way out.”
- “I started using drugs to avoid thinking about life.”
- “I’ve seen the price of an addiction. I saw another guy who lost his left arm because of a dirty needle.”
- “I’ve seen a needle so used that when I injected with it, it would rip my skin off.”
- “I’ve seen six guys use a single syringe without cleaning it.”
- “Disease is not just going to stay in prison. We are all going home.”